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THE OLDEST SOURCES OF SYNAGOGAL CHANT

By Eric Werner

Whenever we read anything about the ancient music of the Synagogue, we invariably encounter complaints or apologies deploring the dearth of ancient musical sources in Judaism. These statements, while to some extent correct, are mostly based upon an erroneous conception of the term "source". What is usually meant, is, that our sources, — we have numerous and various ones, — are not exactly notated, so that we cannot transform them into living music without the help of oral tradition. Yet that help of oral tradition has proven time and again to be a dangerous, at any rate an unreliable support, seldom strong enough to bear the full burden of exact methodology. But it is an undeniable fact that our oldest musical sources go down into the twilight of the 5th and 6th centuries. Some of that material, chiefly accentuated fragments of the Bible, furnished with the so-called Palestinian punctuation, have been made accessible by Paul Kahle. As stated before, we cannot read them without the traditional interpretation of the Teamim, and that is far from being exact. You might ask: How is it possible that we possess 14 fully written pieces of ancient Greek music, and not a scratch of Hebrew? The explanation is simple: The Greeks had a system of notation, based upon the alphabet, which identified each tone with a letter — hence our naming of tones after letters, a, b, c, d, e, and so on. We Jews did not use symbols for each tone, but for *each whole phrase.* Indeed it would have been rather difficult to break up one of those florid, richly embellished Hebrew melodies into single tones. Thus, from the practical point of view the cantillation marks of Jews, Syrians, Armenians, Byzantians, and those of the early Roman Church were more practical, more appropriate to the style of the music, which they symbolized, but alas, much less faithful

than the comparatively clumsy Greek characters. The knowledge of many of the old notations was almost lost for many centuries, as we can see from the statement of Isidorus Hispalensis in the beginning of the 7th century. He says: "It is not possible to put down music in writing, whatever means or systems you may try." Yet, at the very time, when this was written, the Roman Church had already developed the ingenious system of their neumes, the forerunners of our modern notation. I wish to remark in passing that these neumes, too, represent a development of the Syro-Hebraic system of ekphonetic notation. It seems that about the fourth or fifth century the Aramaeans, simultaneously with the Graeco-Syrians, and probably under Jewish influence, created the oldest symbols of rhetoric-musical notation. This was probably the common source of the Masoretic accents, the Roman, Byzantine, Syrian and Armenian neumes. I have dealt with that intriguing problem elsewhere. While it has hitherto been considered impossible to transcribe these symbols into exact notation, since we lack a musical stone of Damiette, we are by now reasonably sure that the next decades will give us important clues for the deciphering of some of these ancient manuscripts. Carsten Hoeg, a Danish musicologist, discovered a Byzantine Bible-codex, of the 11th century, in which many of these ancient ekphonetic symbols were transcribed into the then current Byzantine notation, which today can be deciphered with reasonable exactness. I had the privilege of examining some of the photostats, and I have no doubt that we shall know much more about the Syriac, Byzantine, and, eventually, Hebrew ekphonetic signs in the near future.

Turning now to Jewish documents with exact notation, we must mention in the first place the MS. Elkan Adler 4096, in the possession of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Thus far, it is the oldest notated music manuscript of Judaism. It was published together with a highly dubious transcription, in the Elkan Adler Catalogue, where you may find the history of the piece. The manuscript is a piyut for Simhat Tora by an Amr Ibn Sach'e, a paytan of the 11th century, and furnished with neumes used by the Roman Church in the 13th cent. Since four lines are pressed into the parchment, it is not too difficult to transcribe

the musical text. Mr. Arthur Friedlaender, of the Royal Asiatic Society, attempted this task, but was not entirely successful, although, as a whole, his work remains meritorious. Without entering into purely technical matters, it can be said that he forced the entirely arhythmical tune into a strictly tactic Procrustean bed, thereby distorting its freely swinging character, in which solely the poetic rhythm and its accent dominate. The Ms. was written about 1280–1320, in Northern Italy, as the form of the "Lombardic" neumes clearly indicates. The music of the Ms. has, of course, no chords and no accompaniment. It is a long drawn out melody with a refrain, corresponding to the poetic refrain "כמושה". Its style is closely akin to that of the Gregorian Plainsong of the Church, if we disregard one or two embellishments, which seem to be alien to Gregorian style. Not that Gregorian tunes suffer from lack of musical ornaments! Quite the contrary! Yet the Gregorian embellishments display in most cases the systematizing, ordering spirit of the Occident, whereas oriental Jewish ornaments are unsystematic, spontaneous, and usually left to the discretion of the singer. Of course, the fact that our Ms. is so similar to Gregorian tunes, is not surprising, since it is today proved beyond any peradventure of a doubt that the roots of Gregorianism lie in the music of Palestine and Syria. To quote but one famous catholic musicologist Father Dechevrens: "Gregorian chant is the music of the Hebrews, and there is for the totality of the Roman Catholic melodies but one modal system, not that of the Greeks, but that of the sacred nation of the Hebrews". Nor were the medieval Jews, the contemporaries of our anonymous composer, unaware of that state of affairs. Says Manuello in rather caustic words: מה אמרת חכמת מוסיקה אל הנוצרים נגוב גנבתי מארץ העברים, comparing the Gregorian Chant with young Joseph. A few words are in order regarding my transcription of that ancient piece. For the purpose of popular records I had to add organ accompaniment to the original melody, and while I did not change a note in the tune itself, the character of the piece is somewhat altered by the arrangement. But I hope nevertheless that the transcription will provide a fairly faithful picture of the piece. (Cf. Record Album "Israel Sings.")

If we were to seek systematically for further musical documents in the history of Judaism, our best chances would be in Medieval Spain. Musical culture was well developed in Northern Spain, and the Jews had been quite interested and active in the study of propedeutics, to which music belonged up to the 17th century. As a matter of fact, Spanish Jewry had produced a number of music theorists, of musicians, and even of philosophers of music, as my friend Dr. Sonne and I have shown. Yet, we do not possess any documentary evidence of compositions written by Spanish Jews. The explanation for this strange fact, supplied by the late Dr. Idelsohn, is, that in Southern Spain, Jewish culture was entirely under the spell of the Arabs, and the Arabs did not develop a musical notation till the late 14th century, when a system was created in the Baghdad School of Music under Safi-ad-Din. Even then, their system, a poor kind of tablature, was extremely clumsy, so awkward that Kiesewetter's contemptuous statement is not entirely unjustified: He says: "It seems that the Orientals were at all times so vain, that they refused simple and easy methods in preference to more artificial and complicated ones in order to win the admiration of naive laymen".

As for the Christian Northern part of Spain, Idelsohn argued that there could not have been anything extraordinary in the field of Jewish music. I contradicted this theory more than 12 years ago, for the following general reasons. In view of Gersonides' profound mathematico-musical treatise "De numeris harmonicis", in view of Yehuda ben Isaac's familiarity with the syllables of Solmization, in view of Abraham Portaleone's fine and comprehensive musical erudition, as displayed in his "Shilte Hagibborim", I felt that, at least for Northern Spain and the neighboring countries, Idelsohn's argument was not convincing. Ten years ago, I came across an old article by the French scholar Pierre Aubry "Iter Hispanicum" in which he quotes some medieval musical Ms. of Spain. Titles like "Codas" or "Obada" sounded to me like corrupted Hebrew, and I attempted to get hold of some photographs. For the ensuing ten years, my hunt was unsuccessful, for various reasons, political, personal, and bibliographical; moreover, most of the Mss. had moved from

one hand to the other. When Prof. Anglès, of Barcelona, referred once more to one of these Mss., Mr. Jakob Michael, of New York, generously offered to aid me in obtaining a photostat. And through his efficiency and kindness I really came in possession of one photograph. Indeed, the Ms. was no disappointment, but proved to be full of problems and riddles.

It is a Kedusha motet for three parts, Cantus, Tenor and Contratenor, an elaborate contrapuntal piece, written about 1450–1460 in Northern Spain, as the notation indicates. The first riddle is the text: It is neither Hebrew nor Ladino — it is a kind of mixture of different languages, Hebrew, Spanish, Arabic, containing some unidentified probably corrupted words. I quote the text: "Cados, cados, adonay cherubim, cados, si smyher (?) Harumbrael, Harumbrael. Rausar maho, maho et ydrorum naiso soposo dislacherubim. (Marginal note: "4 nulame") a mealbul lumbi, lumbi, lari discaho: cados, cados, cados". (*See photo on opposite page.*)

I submitted the enigmatic text to a few scholars, but none was able to find any sense in these words. Most of them agreed with my suggestion that this is a semi-secret code of Marrano Jews, to camouflage Hebrew liturgical texts before the dreaded Inquisition. A few single words have been identified: *Harumbrael* seems to be a cabbalistic angel-name "הרים ברא אל", appearing in a cabbalistic Ms. of the Hebrew Union College. *Maho et ydrorum* suggests "מים et ὕδωρ" waters and waters:* *naiso* might be נשאו. *Soposo* is pure old Spanish, meaning to put beneath, or simply under. *4 nulame* seems to indicate four times. Yet, this is all hypothetic.

A most radical thesis is advocated by Dr. Raphael Levy, of Louisiana State University, who suggests, that the entire text is a senseless, phonetic hodge-podge by which the composer, a gentile, tried to reinstate the sound of the Hebrew language. Against this three objections may be raised: First: The composition carries three different tunes: the Cantus sings the ancient Ashkenazic tune of the preamble of the Kedusha for the High

*Prof. Spiegel directed my attention to a passage in *Pirḳe Hechālōt* where this phrase actually occurs.

Holidays; the Tenor carries a tune resembling the shofar — signals: Tru'ā, Shvārim-Tru'a, and Teḳī'ā; the Contratenor has the tune of the Gregorian hymn: "Alma redemptoris mater". The composer succeeded in combining these three tunes in a masterfully contrapuntal fashion. A Gentile would hardly have been able to understand the significance of the shofar for the Holidays; furthermore, he would have exposed himself by setting such strange wording to music; and finally, in those centuries one did not write music for music's sake; each composition had a strictly circumscribed purpose and function. Well, what would have been the concrete function of such a composition? (See my transcription on the next page!)

In place of the hypothesis of a purposeless, gentile hodgepodge I venture the theory that this is a piece by a Marranic composer, who wrote the selection for the secret meetings of the "New Christians" during the High Holidays, which was virtually the only time when the Marranos dared congregate. Possibly the text is camouflaged and only seemingly senseless; the Gregorian hymns, written in the most conspicuous place, would serve the same purpose. Moreover, the text is written in Latin script in order not to provoke suspicion. If we follow the "Maranic" interpretation, then we shall have to change some of our conceptions about the symbiosis of the Spanish Jews with their gentile neighbors. First, we can see from the Ms. that its writer was a fine artist, entirely up to date in the then current musical style and technique. Let me add in passing that that style is extremely intricate and complicated and demands a first-class musical training. Second, the Marranos seem to have had rudiments of a liturgy of their own. According to Louis Newman and Cecil Roth, there is no documentary evidence that the Marranos had any liturgy before the expulsion from Spain But I happen to know of about a dozen Mss. similar to this one; unfortunately I have not as yet been able to obtain photostats of them, since they have changed their locations frequently in the last 40 years. Even the Ms. at hand, which originally was kept in Burgos, must have travelled a good deal, since the Paris National Library, which owns it now, purchased it from the Colombina at Sevilla. To assume that all these Mss., works

of fine and painstaking artistry, are nothing but phonetic hodge-podge pieces, written by funny-minded Gentiles, seems to me too convenient a hypothesis to be followed seriously. Prof. Anglès concurs with me in the rejection of that hypothesis.

However, we shall be able to pass definite judgment on this Ms. and its cognates, when we have located and studied the other Mss. Should they be of the same type, and all indications point in this direction, then we must assume that the Marranos had developed certain extremely interesting pieces of liturgical music, which prove that they — and probably the other Jews as well — were well familiar with the general civilization of their gentile environment. At the same time we would have reason to believe, that there was a continuous — if ever so thin — rivulet of written art-music for the Synagogue in Southern Europe, which left its Catacombes about 1520 or 30 in Italy and sprang into full life at the Mantua School of Jewish Musicians, the protagonists of whom were Leon da Modena and Salomone Rossi.

P. S. Rabbi D. A. Jessurun Cardozo, with whom I discussed the problem, sent me the following comment:

NOTE ON DR. WERNER'S PAPER

I think it is most unlikely if not impossible that a Marrano in Spain would have taken this enormous risk to *write down* a Hebrew melody. Any visible or "concrete" proof of "Judaizing" would be fatal. Writing down a Hebrew prayer or hymn by a Marrano would practically mean signing his own death-warrant.

I think therefore that this melody was written down somewhere in Italy, most likely North Italy, where so many Marranos went to find safety, (remember e. g. Columbus and his family in Genoa.)

Marranos could *not* use prayer-books. We know that prayers were "handed down" by word of mouth. They were mostly in

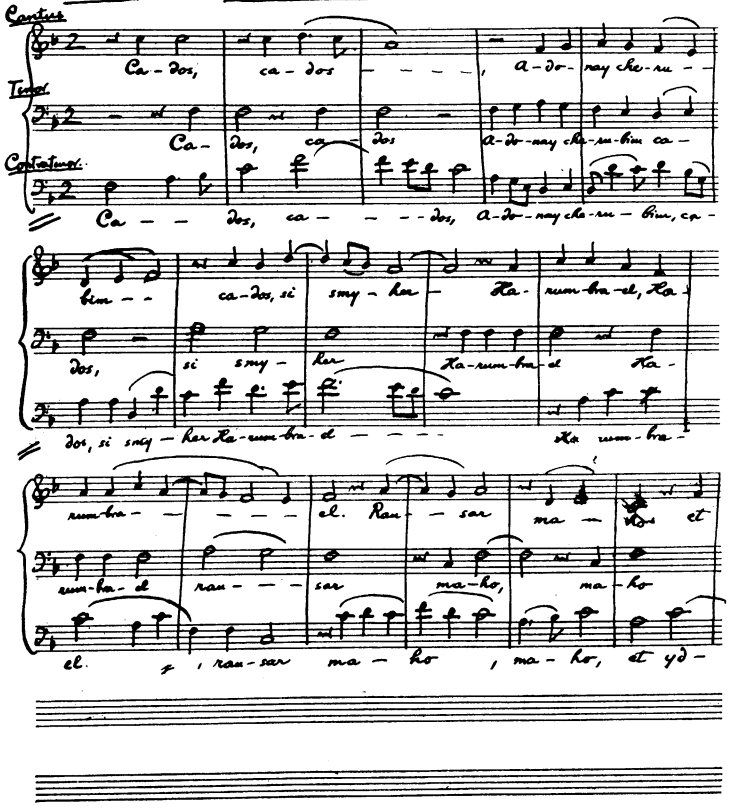
Spanish but included some well-known Hebrew phrases. These Hebrew words — because they were not understood — became "mutilated" and were given some semblance of Spanish words. Hence some of the Hebrew words are not recognizable. Samuel Schwartz in his book "*Os Cristaos Novos em Portugal no Seculo XX*" wrote down some of the prayers that he found among Marranos in North Portugal in the beginning of the twentieth century. In one of these prayers (p. 65) occurs the phrase "*Adunai Sabaat Malcolares Cobrado*" which is a corruption of Adonai Zebaot melo col haaretz kevodo"; in another passage (p. 75) we find the words "*Samua Tome-o La*" corrupted from "Shome'a tefillah".

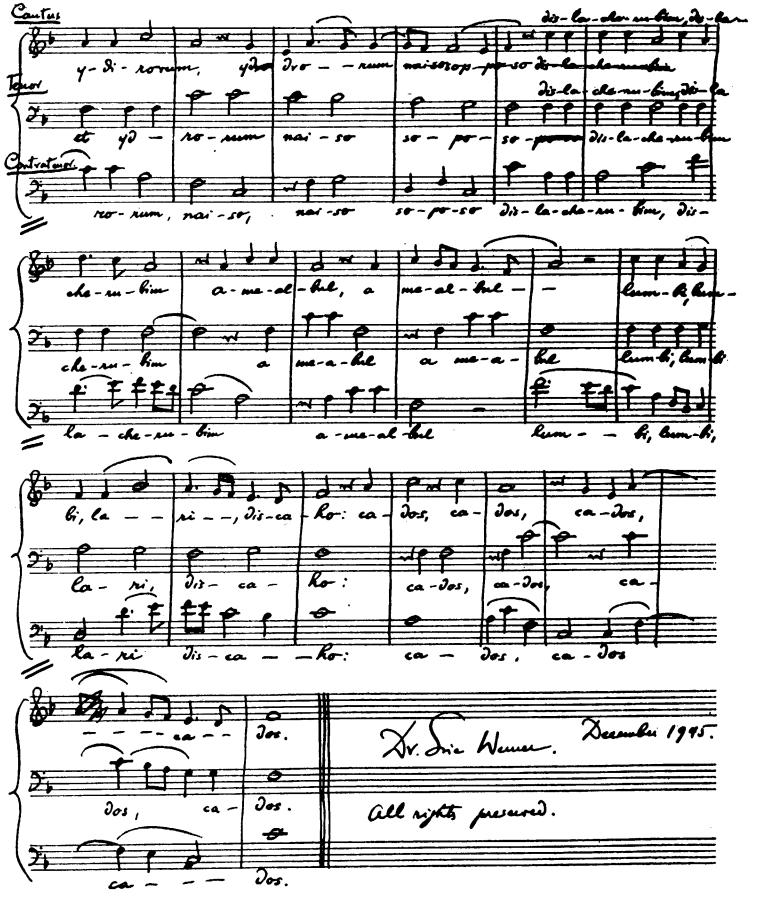
D. A. JESSURUN CARDOZO.

Transcription

Dr. Eric Werner.

Moderato

Spanish MS, Colombina – Sevilla, Paris N. B., N. A. 10719

Cantus
Tenor
Contratenor
Ca - dos, ca - dos - - - - , a - do - nay che - ru - -
Ca - dos, ca - dos a - do - nay che - ru - bim ca -
Ca - - dos, ca - - - - dos, a - do - nay che - ru - bim, ca -
bim - - ca - dos, si smy - ker Ka - rum - ba - el, Ka -
dos, si smy - ker Ka - rum - ba - el - - - - Ka rum - ba -
rum - ba - - - - el. Ra - - sar ma - ho et
rum - ba - el ra - - - sar ma - ho, ma - ho
el. ra - sar ma - ho , ma - ho, et yd -


Cantus
Tenor
Contratenor
y - di - rorum, ydro - - rum naisorop - po - so - la - cha - su - bim, di - la
et yd - ro - rum nai - so so - po - so - po - so - po - so di - la - cha - su - bim
ro - rum, nai - so, nai - so so - po - so di - la - cha - su - bim, dis -
che - ru - bim a - ma - al - bel, a ma - al - bel - - cum - bi, cum -
che - ru - bim a ma - a - bel a ma - a - bel cum - bi, cum - bi
la - che - ru - bim a - ma - al - bel cum - - bi, cum - bi,
bi, la - - ri - -, dis - ca - ro: ca - dos, ca - dos, ca - dos,
ca - ri, dis - ca - ro: ca - dos, ca - dos, ca -
la - ri dis - ca - - ro: ca - dos, ca - dos
- - - - - ca - - dos.
dos, ca - dos.
ca - - - - dos.

Dr. Eric Werner. December 1995.

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